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## Diasporic dispersals and convergences the creative trajectories of a phd project

### Abstract

My critical-creative PhD project is entitled Mehta's Film Trilogy: Theorising Transnational Production and Reception; Practising Diasporic Creativity. It began as a textual analysis dissertation with a video-recorded reception studies component in the University of Adelaide's Discipline of Media in February 2007. Now nearing completion, it has become more than a hybrid research project. Its creative and fluid trajectories are not unlike the dispersals and convergences of diasporic identity and cultural production itself. It has acquired the form of its content; it has come to manifest what it articulates. This reflective compilation aims to map the creative trajectory, while acknowledging the inherent contradictions of imposing any boundaries on a porous qualitative research practice.

### Keywords

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## Diasporic Dispersals and Convergences: The Creative Trajectory of a PhD Project Sukhmani Khorana

My critical-creative PhD project is entitled *Mehta's Film Trilogy: Theorising Transnational Production and Reception; Practising Diasporic Creativity*. It began as a textual analysis dissertation with a video-recorded reception studies component in the University of Adelaide's Discipline of Media in February 2007. Now nearing completion, it has become more than a hybrid research project. Its creative and fluid trajectories are not unlike the dispersals and convergences of diasporic identity and cultural production itself. It has acquired the form of its content; it has come to manifest what it articulates. This reflective compilation aims to map the creative trajectory, while acknowledging the inherent contradictions of imposing any boundaries on a porous qualitative research practice.

The aforementioned project has become an epistemological and methodological convergence of the auteur, genre, and audience/cultural studies approaches. What results is an academic-reflexive dissertation and a visual diasporic essay that is part autobiography, part documentary and part cultural text. The latter is a cinematic essay of the kind that Peter Thompson defines as incorporating the documentary, fiction and experimental genres where appropriate.<sup>1</sup> The form of the creative piece can also be theorised using Elizabeth McIntyre's self-reflexive account of the methods used to produce a script. In this account, she adapts Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity to conclude that 'the researcher is placed within the complex system of interaction between the individual, field and domain in the creative process'.<sup>2</sup> The project as a whole manifests researcher-artist-teacher Robyn Stewart's notion of a 'neonarrative' in that it uses a *bricolage* of qualitative research methods, and is both located between, and is a crossover that links theory and practice.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the dissertation and the visual essay, a literary digital counterpart reflecting many of the features of an informal essay has been maintained for most of the development of this project. The web-log or blog, begun in May 2007, four months into my candidature, was an attempt to digest the numerous personal changes, intellectual stimulants and creative insights I was receiving at the time.<sup>4</sup> It became a journal for the development of the self, intertwined with a record of the progression of the thesis and the genesis of the visual essay. As a collection of text, photos, video links, film and book reviews, treatments and fragmented ideas, it manifests the shifting content and form of diasporic cultural production itself. Despite these shifts however, diasporic texts remain coherent representations of the lives of diasporans, as well as icons of the global-local nuances of the transnational era. Reflecting on the

<sup>1</sup> Peter Thompson, *The Cinematic Essay*, Chicago Media Works, 15 June 2009, [http://www.chicagomediaworks.com/2instructworks/3editing\\_doc/3editing\\_docinematicessay.html](http://www.chicagomediaworks.com/2instructworks/3editing_doc/3editing_docinematicessay.html).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth McIntyre, *Facilitating the Script*, Speculation and Innovation: applying practice led research in the creative industries, Queensland University of Technology, 15 June 2009, <http://www.speculation2005.net>.

<sup>3</sup> Stewart, Robyn, 'Creating New Stories for Praxis: Navigations, Narrations, Neonarratives' in Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bold (eds.), *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2007) 130.

<sup>4</sup> Sukhmani Khorana, *Over-exposed Image*, 15 June, 2009, <http://over-exposed-image.blogspot.com>.

role of border-crossing theorists and artists in this era, Azade Sehyan asserts in *Writing Outside the Nation* that 'every theory of postcolonial, transnational, or diasporic literature and art is most convincingly articulated and performed by works of literature and art themselves'.<sup>5</sup> The notion of performativity is crucial, as the blog is a performative narrative of my own journey of diasporic production. What follows is an edited selection of blog entries from the pre-production, production and post-production stages of the filmmaking process, punctuated by poetic fragments reflecting on displacement.

### **Pre-Production - May 2008** **'My Filmmaking Anti-Manifesto Manifesto'**

A manifesto is a medium that is intended for communication with the whole world. Such a definition of 'manifesto' is in line with its political origins, but what purpose can it serve for artists?

When I met filmmaker Deepa Mehta on a film set in Toronto, she was reluctant to talk about her intended and/or real audiences, and insisted that if you didn't write/make for yourself, there was no point in writing/making. This response conjured up for me the image of the isolated (and probably distraught) Modernist artist in his/her ivory tower. And then a cynical voice arose – somebody built the ivory tower, just as someone constructed Mehta's set, operated her cameras, microphones and lights, acted in her films, and distributed them. Perhaps that is the moment I began to distance myself from the artistic ideal, from Mehta, from the imaginary documentary in my head, and took the first steps to being my own (albeit collaboratively forming) filmmaker.

Despite taking these steps last December, I have been struggling with decisions relating to the content and form of 'my' film. I recently presented a number of options for conducting filmed interviews at a postgraduate forum, and was bewildered at the multiplication of these choices by the time I was done. With the encouragement of my supervisor and close friends, I soldiered on and sent out a Facebook message to members of my self-created group, 'Cinema Connoisseurs', and other film aficionados, asking them a series of questions about what appealed to them about the documentary genre. I have received a few noteworthy responses, and maintain my stance on the need for 'effective' filmmaking to be a collaborative effort. However, what has been slightly more productive is thinking about these questions myself and reflecting on personal aesthetic and political choices. This necessitates the question – is it more useful to head back into the academic/artistic ivory tower?

After careful deliberation, my answer to the aforementioned question is an emphatic and unequivocal no. I have realized that the act of communicating my ideas, however unformed, was crucial to their evolution into something that both resonated with me, the aspiring filmmaker, and had some meaning for my potential audiences. Putting the beginnings of my thoughts into words, and transforming these words into queries that I could confidently project onto the known world became a kind of

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<sup>5</sup> Azade Sehyan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 7.

‘creative research’ – difficult to quantify or classify, but undoubtedly contributing to the process of creation of the film.

This processual nature of creation parallels the evolution of my project and my relation to it since its commencement over a year ago. I am no longer caught up in attempting to pay a tribute to Mehta and her work through my film. Subsequent to meeting her in Canada and broadening the breadth of my research to include reviews in India, I have decided that the documentary will not merely be a response to the filmmaker herself, but a ‘poetic document’ of my own emerging filmmaking practice and the specific Indian-Australian diasporic context in which it is currently situated.

Why have I chosen to present my life and those of other Indian migrants in Adelaide when it would have been easier (in terms of academic justification) to record individual or focus group responses to Mehta’s trilogy and edit these together to create some semblance of a film in the documentary genre? Within my doctoral project, an account of a specific site of the Indian diasporic experience may not be the most obvious choice for a creative component, but it certainly resonates with the personal-political stories that artists/intellectuals in the diaspora (like Mehta) are beginning to tell to a steadily growing global audience. The question now arises – if such work is being done by Indians and non-Indians occupying the ‘displaced’ sphere, what specificity do I bring to this global narrative?

I have chosen the well-known paisley pattern as a motif for my documentary, perhaps to both signify my specificity and broadly apply its fluid curves as a trajectory of the contemporary migrant experience. What I bring to the global narrative then, is my geographical positioning in Australia (a relatively recent site for Indian student/professional migration, and my personal ‘route’ to the west), my imaginative positioning in India (in that it continues to be the primary concern of my academic work, and is the place of familial ‘roots’), and other experiences that do not neatly fit in the first-generation migrant mould. The people I interview will also highlight the similar-yet-different stories of the often-stereotyped migrant worker/student/business owner and how their identity-construction is impacted by (and in turn impacts upon) representations of them in the media of the host country, the native country, and the diaspora.

The documentary, then, will be another representation of them, albeit through the lens of someone who is in a similarly displaced position. Is this unlike Mehta’s representation of India in her elemental trilogy? Even though *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water* are not films about the diaspora, they are of the diaspora by virtue of the site of their conception and the dispersed nature of their consumption. Would it be a leap to suggest that they are also, in a way, representative of the diaspora? Does this mean filmmakers like Mehta and myself will always be considered ‘diasporic filmmakers’, regardless of our subject matter? Perhaps the diasporic location is ideally situated for exploiting the ‘crossover’ potential of cultural products in general, and cinematic representations in particular.

Yes, I want to cross-over as a filmmaker. I want to make back and forth trips among rather than between these points – the university, the film industry; commercial cinema, art cinema; feminism, postcolonialism; politics, poetics; India, Australia; as well as what lies beyond.

## **Ruins**

Am I glad that you still stand tall?  
Or saddened to see you decrepit like  
My grandfather.

Who owns you now?  
Who rents your dusty spaces?  
I hope you are still peopled.

Would it be better if you came down?  
Would my family survive it?  
How would I remember home?

Don't haunt me now.  
I can see you peeping like  
You overlook my new place too.

## **Production - October 2008** **We Journey Like A Paisley**

This film is a snippet in time. It is an attempt to capture the lives of young people of Indian origin or ethnicity living in Adelaide in the spring of 2008.

What does this spring bring forth? What do these lives bring forth? How do I, as a fellow Indian living in Adelaide, as an interviewer cum director cum country cousin cum peer function in such a situation?

I am exploring where I belong through their belongings, as well discovering their multiple affiliations through our shared location. They have journeyed. I have journeyed. The film is a testament to our past journeys, as well as a beacon for the journeys yet to come. This film is a paisley - fluid yet shapeful, rooted yet cross-cultural. This journey is a paisley. We journey like a paisley.

## **Views**

Which city is this? Nostalgia or Presence. Hidden or Disguised. Memorised or Forgotten.

Perhaps forgiven for its lack of clear vision.

Excused for its childly insolence.

Loved for its view of the skyline. And why shouldn't it be?

Now that the city of temples is present in the city of churches  
And there is a divinity in familiarity that goes beyond godliness.

Is the city my god then? Or my goddess?

Perhaps it is confusing all sorts of boundaries.

Don't blame my camera for it. You know your roofs are unstable.

But I like it here.



I mean there.

## **Post-Production - December 2008**

### **'Diaspora and Dispersal'**

I have nearly finished interviewing people for my documentary titled, *I Journey Like a Paisley*, and am now well on my way to editing it into a coherent piece of cinema that articulates the Indian-Australian experience through my individualised artistic lens. What have I learned from these interviews that is different from my academic research into diaspora theory and cultural practice? Is there a single, unequivocal message? Who is my audience? Why am I passionate about this story?

Perhaps what I have to acknowledge first and foremost is that it is indeed my own experience of living away from the land of my birth (an experience that is gradually acquiring diasporic undertones) which has fuelled my interest in diasporic narrative(s). But an old feeling tells me I was curious about diasporic writers, filmmakers and members of my extended family living abroad even when I was 'wholly Indian'. Why did the Deepa Mehtas and Mira Nairs always haunt my dreams and linger on the horizons of my imagination? A worshipper of Arundhati Roy's brand of writerly-activism in my teenage years, I was still more puzzled by the likes of Salman Rushdie, and continue to be fascinated by his amalgamation of recklessness and wisdom. Reading his book of essays called *Imaginary Homelands* while undertaking a third-year university course on world literature, I figured I was always drawn to the idea of home(s) away from home(s), probably destined to wander.

Wandering reminds me of a story my grandmother told me on my last trip to India. Always keeping me up-to-date on Sikh folklore, she said that once Guru Nanak went with one of his disciples to a village where the locals treated him indifferently. On his way out, he wished the villagers well, saying may they stay here and prosper. In the next village he visited, he was showered with respect and gratitude. This time, he wished the villagers left their abode and dispersed. The perplexed disciple was told that the latter set of villagers were good-at-heart, and hence it was better for the world if they wandered around and shared their spirit. The former village folk, on the contrary, were better off staying put and not polluting others' with their negativity.

And thus, I believe wandering spirits have a higher purpose. Sometimes, however, evidence of extremism or frozen cultural practices amongst those living in the diaspora (Indian and others) questions my faith in the liberalism of transnational populations. Aren't there bad apples everywhere though? While academia tells me that diasporic citizens are merely 'complex', one of my interviewees proclaims himself a 'confused desi'. What do I think/feel? The path becomes less muddled as time passes - choices are made both consciously and sub-consciously, accents are shed and acquired in context, clothes and jewellery learn to make adjustments. Hence, I have come to view the diasporic experience as an ongoing negotiation rather than a confusion of values or a complexity of heritage. It is a process of self-discovery, creative-expression and knowledge-sharing that is as enriching as enlightenment itself, provided you do not succumb to the pitfalls of nostalgia for the motherland,

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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

contempt for anything ostensibly foreign, or an uncritical attitude towards the economic and social advantages of the new society. This is my message of hope from the diaspora, but it is for everyone. The message is not new, but I/we have travelled far and wide to disperse it. The stories of our diasporic lives are a testament to this dispersal of humanity, of universal values, of cross-cultural sharing (not just understanding or co-existence).